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EDITORIAL

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Documentary film mutations for social justice: Introductory reflections

INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

In recent years, documentary production has introduced different degrees of interaction and immersion that allow the user to engage, collaborate, co-create and participate. In an attempt to break the linearity of traditional formats and offer new ways to tell a factual story, documentary professionals have developed and distributed new media platforms capable of collecting, sharing, remixing and dispensing various types of content across different media, breaking the boundaries of the conventional screen. The screening of contemporary documentaries is not limited to a screen only (traditional screen) but has access to multiple viewing options, including cinema screens,

computer monitors, mobile phones and virtual reality (VR). Screens are increasingly more accessible and more versatile. Traditional linear documentaries embody a physical and emotional perception of the moving pictures seen on the screen. For productions such as contemporary interactive documentaries designed mainly for the web, the screen differs from the traditional cinema screen. This is not only in terms of size, location or use but, above all, in the different approach that the user/viewer has to it. A computer screen and increasingly numerous portable device screens are more personal than collective (as the old term personal computer suggests); they are technologies that, unlike TV sets or cinema screens, need and indeed 'imply physical interaction' in order to operate (Odorico 2011: 242).

In recent VR documentary productions, for example, technological advances made screens wider for audience's perception but smaller for support (phone, headset etc.). Kate Nash suggests that

> 'while the screen has not disappeared in an ontological sense, at the heart of VR is the production of the illusion that we have entered into and become a part of the world that we used to watch on the screen'. (2018: 97)

My Brother's Keeper, a documentary on the American Civil War (presented at Sundance in 2017), is a 360º experience that the audience can choose to engage with through a variety of methods, such as the use of a visor on the phone or on a tablet as a YouTube video.

Contemporary documentaries often utilize cutting-edge technologies and reside in a digital environment; they are a combination of the classic concept of linear documentary form – with its several modes of representing reality (see Bruzzi 2006; Nichols 2001) – and the digital medium – with its interactive and immersive applications that allow multiple levels of storytelling, meaning, interaction and user participation in the creation of content (see Aarseth 1994, 1997; Aston and Gaudenzi 2012; Nash et al. 2014; Odorico 2015). The tradition can also be found in how contemporary new media documentaries present Michael Renov's four fundamental tendencies of documentary: (1) to record, reveal or preserve; (2) to persuade or promote; (3) to analyse or interrogate and (4) to express (1993: 30). These tendencies in contemporary documentaries serve as a way to see how to widen the gap between the image and its truthful representation, allowing more room for collective inclusion, immediacy, aesthetical experimentation and (in the context of this journal issue) political and social activism. Furthermore, they allow the audience to have a 'role' within the whole documentary process, enhancing often innovative forms of collaboration (Dovey and Rose 2012), co-creation (Zimmerman 2019) and polyphony (Aston and Odorico 2018). Every sector of the documentary film industry has been affected by this post-digital shift (the original digital shift is associated with the 1990s); for instance, the majority of documentary festivals worldwide offer programmes that include new media exhibitions with dedicated events, venues and screenings. In this context, the role of the screen mentioned above becomes significant. New forms of representation, strategies of communication, consumption, participation, mobilization and methodologies for the evaluation of its social impact have emerged over this period. Nowadays we should read the documentary film form in relation to its synergies with digital media, such as social media, databases and big data, and complementary forms of representation such as animation (Formenti 2014;

Honess Roe 2013; Skoller 2011; Ward 2011), immersive experiences in VR (de la Peña et al. 2010; de la Peña 2010, 2017; Hardee 2016; McRoberts 2018; Nash 2018; Rose 2018; Shin and Biocca 2018), interactive documentaries or i-docs (Aston and Gaudenzi 2012; Aston et al. 2017; Miller and Allor 2016; Nash 2012, 2014; Smaill 2018; Aston and Odorico 2018) and mobile-mentaries (Schleser 2011).

Cinema as a medium was born to capture aspects of reality through moving images. Such was the initial purpose of the Lumière Brothers at the end of the nineteenth century, who captured scenes of everyday life using the so-called 'actualities': reflections of the complex world that surrounds us. Actualities were short complex films that experimented with technology, reality, staged fiction and contemporary issues all together at the same time – much the same as what contemporary documentaries do. Approximately thirty years later, ethnographic filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty portrayed realities remote from western societies in films like *Nanook of the North* (1922), in which the director wanted to show the 'character' of subjects filmed, even though the modern society of the time had already started spreading its influence on the Arctic area, destroying traditions and ritual; and his second feature *Moana* (1926), which inspired John Grierson's definition of documentary cinematic context: 'creative treatment of actuality' (Grierson 1933: 8).

In the 1930s, British documentary distinguished itself from other national production because of a distinct mode of film practice that was, at the same time, socially purposeful and aesthetically innovative. The economic situation of Britain was a major factor in the genesis of the movement and, indeed, Grierson and his school are widely considered pioneers in using the documentary film form for social change, hence giving a voice to the victims of social injustices (Winston 1988) with powerful films such as *Housing Problems* (Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton 1935).

With the publication of his *First Principles of Documentary* (1932–34), Grierson defines and describes the relationship between documentary and the development of citizenship in modern society, promoting documentary's creative dramatization of information, serving the wider goals of social utility and social reform. The line between social documentary as a tool for critical thinking and social documentary as a pedagogical tool is very fine, and other filmmakers at that time developed the documentary form with this purpose, including Dziga Vertov and Robert J. Flaherty.

Nowadays, documentary film continues to pursue and play its social role, documenting and reporting stories of inequality and discrimination in relation to a number of social issues, including, among others, human rights violations, mass violence, refugee-seeking, domestic and gender violence, gender discrimination, workers' rights, education rights and poverty. However, contemporary documentaries, thanks to the potentialities of emerging digital technologies, are currently experimenting, testing and developing new forms in order to further pursue its original aim of documenting reality and playing an active social role. Much like the digital shift in the 1990s, documentary film has experienced in the past decade (give or take) a consistent change in form and styles. Filmmakers have been experimenting with new tools, pushing the boundaries of reality and truth. Participation, interactivity and immersion play an important part, dictating the direction that documentary is taken not only at an experimental, educational and independent level but also at an industry level. Audiences are more familiar with digital technologies and are able to engage with them on a deeper level, often understanding well the narrative structure and potential of the documentaries for civic impact.

While very different in form and scope, these non-linear works are not unlike their more traditional predecessors, in that their creation is often driven by a desire to intervene at a social level. Contemporary documentary forms, as new media factual productions, position themselves in a sort of intermediate zone between 'the real' and 'digital technology', which also aim to engage with social issues and social justice – they do not move away from the traditional motivation of documentary practice but they expand the form using enhanced techniques and styles to represent reality. Contemporary documentaries face an important challenge – how to combine communicative strategies with dynamic and changeable technologies that can be used as a powerful tool to reinforce the way we see, describe and understand our world without excluding anyone, making it a fair and democratic process (social change). Hence, according to Zimmerman,

> [d]ocumentary is not a simple genre. Documentary can not be reduced to one form or set of practices. Rather, it may be more productively thought of as a continually evolving constellation of practices across many different technologies that investigate, engage, and interrogate the historical world.
>
> (2019: 1)

It appears that the documentary form, throughout its history as well as contemporary developments of the form, needs to work together with current technological developments in order to represent reality. The impression being that it is reliant on technological developments in order to expand itself and offer new possibilities in terms of storytelling; in terms of the position and role of the author, of the audience; and in terms of redesigning concepts of time (non-linearity) and space (remote participation).

The digital revolution in the 1990s changed the way audio-visual content was produced and experienced. The current post-digital condition gives new tools that can bridge the gap between the medium itself and its audience, making the content even more powerful from the point of view of social impact. The result is potentially a transformation of the documentary genre as a whole, where films are nowadays seen as records of interaction and participation rather than expositions of facts, hence reinforcing the potential impact that documentary can have in our current society. It is as though documentary has found itself in a similar position to where it was in the early days of cinema. Just as the Lumière Brothers had a movie camera, documentary directors now have interactive platforms, VR technologies, etc., which radically change not only the audience's relationship with the process of viewing but also the way in which stories (real stories) are told and perceived.

Documentaries have always been used as a tool for social activism, assuming important roles in political and ethical debates. The documentary form is continuously used as a tool to present and question different aspects of society. Grierson describes documentary as a tool with civic educational potential (Nichols 2001: 3); such a tool for social change examines and critiques our society through real stories, real events and real people. On the same note, he also saw documentary as much as a sociological project as one of aesthetics, a project that could solve problems such as social justice. Documentaries enrich the lives of individuals. They have a unique ability to engage and connect people, transform communities and improve societies. In Gina Marchetti's words,

> [c]itizen activists, radical artists, and media guerrillas search for ways to speak truth to power, produce meaningful change, and challenge orthodoxies. Ripping through propaganda and pointing to enlightened engagement, documentaries, at their progressive best, offer hope that images can, indeed transform lives for the better.
>
> (cited in Zimmermann 2019: xi)

How can contemporary new media documentaries have an impact and transform our lives for the better? This question does not have an easy answer, and this special issue of the *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies* explores this theme. Interactive and immersive interfaces allow viewers to find their way through difficult terrains, become immersed in them and have an interactive and transformative experience. They allow and enhance alternative visions, potentially enabling audiences' engagement with questions of social justice across social, racial, political and economic boundaries. According to Husak,

> [a] century of social engagement through documentary shows that the affective powers of documentary can raise awareness, change lives, form and mobilize communities, and influence policy makers. It is no surprise then that a long list of scholars, artists and activists have produced, studied and perceived documentary first and foremost as a democratic tool with civic potential. Bill Nichols famously remarked that documentary belongs to the register of 'discourses of sobriety', seeking to exercise power for particular goals.
>
> (2018: 16)

OUTLINE OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

A two-day symposium on documentary film mutations, held at the College of Fine Arts (Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain) on 4 and 5 July 2019 and supported by ECREA's Film Studies Section, is the origin of this special issue, titled 'Documentary Film Mutations: New Opportunities for Social Justice'. It intended to explore new opportunities that emerging digital technologies offer to documentary film in its purpose of pursuing its social role. Ten articles shape this issue, contributed by a total of seventeen authors. All of them seek to explore how new media documentary practices, as analysed in Zimmermann and De Michiel's book (2017), are developed nowadays by adopting the traditional documentary film's function of reporting social injustices. This is a function that historically has enhanced people's awareness and their engagement in social issues, but recently new documentary practices have been carried out, thanks to the technological developments mentioned above.

New media documentary practices can be characterized by transmedia and participatory approaches. An example of this is *The Quipu Project* (2015) analysed by Anna Wiehl in her article titled 'Digital transformation of doing documentary: Committed documentary and the knitting of networks of co-creation'. This online project gives the opportunity to its participants – victims of the Peruvian state's sterilization programme (1990s) – to narrate their life stories of past suffering. These victims of human rights violations – more than mere subjects – are participants in the project in that they become co-creators of the media content, making this platform a key example of participatory documentary. Wiels' article focuses on how participatory

and transmedia storytelling is collaboratively developed within the production of an interactive documentary. To this end, the author analyses *The Quipu Project*, bringing together, among others, Aston's notion of 'emplaced interaction' (2017), Cizek and Uricchio's position on 'collective wisdom and co-creation' (2019a, 2019b) and Winston et al.'s adaptation of Gaventa's power cube model (2017).

Another Latin America-centred interactive documentary platform – *Immigrant Nation Media* – is the object of study of Ana Limón Serrano and Tamara Moya Jorge's article, 'Documentary subversions and migrant agency: Towards an alternative audio-visual portrait of immigrant communities in the United States'. *Immigrant Nation Media* aims to give a voice to the South American migrants (mainly) who attempt to conduct dignified lives in the United States, in opposition to the general discourse based on hegemonic stereotypes of migration. Their analysis also focuses on the project's collaborative and co-creative dimensions, adding an educational approach and dedication to migrant empowerment through the exploration of three aspects: the functions and roles of the participants/co-creators, the aesthetics and narrative elements of these alternative representations of migration and migrants and the opportunities that the platform offers in terms of interaction and critical reception.

Another project based on media literacy as a tool for social inclusion and empowerment is HEBE i-doc (2017), the object of study of Manel Jiménez-Morales, Marta Lopera-Mármol and Alan Salvadó Romero's article, 'Youth empowerment through the creation of i-docs: Educational and social impacts'. HEBE i-doc is the outcome of a research project conducted by five Spanish universities and funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, which seeks to foster youth empowerment through engaging six youngsters with different cultural, educational, family and social backgrounds in making media content. In doing so, this project attempts to promote citizen inclusion, thus reducing the risk of digital and social exclusion to vulnerable young people. HEBE i-doc was created as a process of 'art-based research' (McNiff 2008); the authors designed a participative research methodology and created an interactive platform for exchanging experiences and promoting online communication, collaborative practices and digital and artistic co-creation skills.

Likewise, young people and university initiatives are the subjects of Begoña Ivars-Nicolás, Francisco Javier Martínez-Cano and Joan Cuadra's article, 'Immersive experiences in 360º video for social youth engagement'. In their case, they examine the possibilities that the new 360º video technology presents for youth engagement in social issues. Their article introduces the CREA TV university platform, a higher education project that hosts the audio-visual productions made by Miguel Hernández University students. The article's authors focus on the production and reception of one project titled *Miguel Hernández 360º* (Joan Cuadra 2018). The article seeks to document the user's experience of this new form of representation (360º) that aims to engage young audiences with the consumption of social and cultural products. In addition, in order to examine the users' immersive experiences, the article presents the findings of an evaluation process whose participants were a sample of high school students.

The study of immersive 360º documentaries is also the main topic in Adriana Paíno-Ambrosio and Mª Isabel Rodríguez-Fidalgo's article, 'Use of

virtual reality and 360º video as narrative resources in the documentary genre: Towards a new immersive social documentary?' The authors explore the application of immersive narratives, within the social documentary genre, through a qualitative content analysis based on a sample of 49 immersive productions. However, the productions analysed by the authors are not only limited to 360º video but also include VR technology projects published under the 'documentary' category in the *WITHIN* online platform. The formulation of some research questions – such us how are immersive technologies being used for storytelling, and to what extent are these new forms of representations affecting the social dimension of documentary practices? – open up a discussion on what the authors call 'immersive social reporting' and the emergence of a new format defined by them as 'immersive social documentary'.

To figure out how the use of new technology motivates and drives citizen's engagement and empowerment is similarly the main objective of Marta Pérez-Escolar and Laura Cortés-Selva's article, 'Strengthening women empowerment through i-docs: Alternative forms of participation and civic engagement in the feminist movement'. Their article explores how the participation and engagement in interactive documentaries reinforces the sense of belonging to the feminist movement, performing a new form of women empowerment. With the purpose of identifying the motivational elements that push citizens to get involved in feminist causes and to be concerned about different feminist issues, they draw upon the eight core drives represented by each side of the *Octalysis* methodology proposed by Chou (2013). They use this methodology in their analysis of three interactive feminist documentaries: *She Is Beautiful When She Is Angry* (Dore 2014), *En la brecha* (Reig Valera 2018) and *Las sinsombrero* (Balló et al. 2015). Following a taxonomy previously elaborated by the authors and based on the 'interactive potential' of documentary films (Cortés-Selva and Pérez-Escolar 2016), this sample of i-docs enables different levels of interaction and participation, which combines the methodological approaches proposed by Gifreu (2011), Gaudenzi (2013) and Nash (2012). Their findings show that the most powerful motivational element in the three interactive documentaries is the *epic meaning* and *calling* core drive, which indicates that users believe they are doing something greater than themselves – in this case, the defence of women's rights.

It is also proved that interactive documentaries are a powerful tool for exploring health issues. Sergio Villanueva Baselga's article, 'Interactive documentaries and health: Combating HIV-related stigma and cultural trauma', seeks to explore interactive documentaries as a tool for raising awareness of the impact of HIV-related stigma, cultural trauma associated with HIV and the HIV epidemic in the 1980s and 90s. To this end, the author analyses two interactive documentaries: *Vertical/Horizontal* (2016) and *The Graying of AIDS* (2014). Villanueva Baselga is interested in how these cultural productions represent people living with stigma and whether or not that representation challenges or reinforces stigmatization. The author studies them using a three-dimensional film analysis: first, involving the analysis of the interactive platform's degree of openness and participation; second, the analysis of how the stigma associated with HIV is represented, discussed and articulated through the voices of both the social actors and the narrators; and, third, the exploration of if and how these representations expose the cultural trauma associated with HIV.

Documentary games are the focus of David O. Dowling's article, 'Documentary games for social change: Recasting violence in the latest

generation of i-docs'. The author includes in his analysis three documentary games as alternative representations of violence for social critique: *We Are Chicago* (Culture Shock Games 2017), *1979 Revolution: Black Friday* (iNK Stories 2016) and *Blindfold* (iNK Stories 2017). Dowling's study examines these documentary games – rooted in journalistic reporting that recast violence – as an expression of social and political discourse. The author first frames these three documentary games theoretically, in terms of their function as interactive digital journalism, and then – drawing on Fernández-Vara's (2019) approach to game analysis – examines both textual and contextual resources in order to evaluate their social and academic impact. By exposing the motivations and effects of violence from multiple perspectives, including victims, perpetrators and bystanders, Dowling's findings show that these three documentary games are relevant cultural representations of oppressed populations.

Julia Scott-Stevenson's article, 'Do as I say, not as I do: Documentary, data storytelling and digital privacy', examines the intersections between interactive documentary and digital rights, across notions of surveillance, privacy and data. As the author suggests, the collection of personal data is exponentially increasing, violating in many cases the digital rights of the citizen. Scott-Stevenson's article includes case studies of interactive documentaries in which strategies of reflexivity and responsiveness are proposed. The selected case studies are *We Feel Fine* (Jonathan Harris 2006), *I Love Alaska* (2009), *Do Not Track* (Brett Gaylor 2015), *The Social Sorting Experiment* (Steye Hallema 2018), *Algorithmic Perfumery* (Frederik Duerinck 2018) and *Stealing Ur Feelings* (Noah Levenson 2019). Furthermore, the author explores the varied forms of representation that these examples of interactive projects develop in their shared purpose to incorporate and reflect on personal data and on ethical issues regarding the use of digital technologies and data collection.

Lastly, Miren Gutiérrez's article, 'Data and documentaries: Methodological hybridisations in activism', directs us to examples where the combination of different types of content and formats become a powerful tool in reporting social injustices. In these case studies, data gain a relevant social and political function, thanks to the original use of geodata and metadata, among others. Especially important for this purpose is the combination of documentary practices with the use of data analysis and visualization. Considering critical data and documentary studies, the author examines the methodological hybridization model proposed by Forensic Architecture, a multidisciplinary research centre based in Goldsmiths, University of London. Six of Forensic Architecture's short films – *The Left-to-Die Boat* (2014), *The Bombing of Rafah* (2015), *Torture in Saydnaya Prison* (2016), *Torture and Detention in Burundi* (2018), *The Seizure of the Iuventa* (2018) and *Killing in Umm al-Hiran* (2019) – are included in the article to explore, through content and comparative analysis, how Forensic Architecture hybridizes its practices and tools. In doing so, the author offers an empirical analysis of a specific corpus of data activism focusing on their main hybridization strategies, which includes a combination of image complexity and synchronization; fluid dynamics mixed with other techniques; and the blend of 3D modelling, animation and sound analysis. In addition, the author offers a classification of these strategies as a heuristic tool that can be employed in further research. The article's findings demonstrate that broadening the horizons of documentary, journalism and activism, through the hybridization of content, forms and strategies, serves as a powerful tool for verifying official government statements, gathering evidence and

consequently generating counter-narratives that can potentially be used for reporting social injustices.

Thanks to new technologies, the role of the documentary form has evolved and new media documentary practices have emerged as mutations of the traditional format, with the purpose of highlighting and encouraging political and social change and, at the same time, offering new opportunities for achieving social justice. We sincerely hope that the ten articles included in this special issue succeed in opening a discussion in the field of contemporary documentary and social justice.

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